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DEPT FOR NEA, EUR/WE AND S/I

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SUBJECT: IRAQ: ITALY HASN'T CLOSED THE DOOR ON PRT YET

REF: STATE 93887

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Classified By: DCM Anna Borg for Reasons 1.4 (a), (b) and (d)

Summary

1. (S) Senior Italian diplomatic advisors told visiting Deputy Senior Advisor for Iraq (S/I) Barbara Stephenson June 9 that Italy will withdraw all of its troops in Iraq before the end of 2006, but plans to remain engaged in reconstruction efforts. They were pessimistic about Italy continuing to lead the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Dhi Qar province in the absence of Italian force protection. They agreed, however, to consider alternative security solutions, vowing to leave the door open for FM D'Alema to discuss directly with Secretary Rice in their June 16 meeting in Washington. Stephenson firmly stressed that the planned PRT seemed fully consistent with the government's campaign promises and announced policy to support the Iraqi people in the transition from a military to civilian assistance program.

2. (S) The Prodi government has clearly buckled under pressure of the far left to pull its troops out of Iraq. Prodi's razor-thin majority in the Senate and a surprisingly strong showing by left-wing radicals have forced Prodi to revisit the PRT commitment. Deputy S/I Stephenson was successful in bringing the Italian position back from a determined "no PRT" to a willingness to consider alternative force protection options that would allow Italy to maintain its civilian leadership, but the devil remains in the details. End summary.

3. (C) Deputy S/I Barbara Stephenson met with senior Italian diplomats in Rome June 9 to discuss Italy's plans for its PRT in Dhi Qar province. Stephenson, accompanied by DCM and Embassy notetaker, met first with Stefano Sannino, PM Prodi's Senior Diplomatic Advisor, Achille Amerio, Diplomatic Advisor to Defense Minister Parisi, and Marco Carnelos, PM Prodi's Diplomatic Advisor for Middle East issues. Stephenson, accompanied by DCM, Acting Political Minister Counselor, NEA/I Political-Military Officer Peter Evans, Embassy notetaker, Senior OSD Deputy for USD-P ISA Coalition Affairs

James Stahlman, and Joint Staff (J5) Brian Pearl then met with senior MFA officials, including DG for the Mediterranean and Middle East Riccardo Sessa, Sessa's Chief of Staff Carlo Formosa, MFA Iraq Task Force Director Gianludivico De Martino, and Iraq Task Force officer Stefano Stucci, followed by a separate meeting with FM D'Alema's Chief of Staff Ferdinando Nelli Feroci, Policy Advisor Marta Dassu', and Diplomatic Advisor Alfredo Conte.

14. (C) In each of the meetings, Stephenson stressed the strong U.S. desire that Italy continue to lead the PRT in Dhi Qar province and provide full force protection. Now that the Iraqis have their government in place, and the international Compact for Iraq is moving forward, abandoning the PRT would send the wrong message at a critical time. Stephenson praised FM D'Alema's words of support for the Iraqi government during his June 7 visit to Iraq and Italy's commitment to continuing engagement. Italy and the U.S. need to send a positive, unified message on Iraq, she said.

Italy Set on "Complete" Troop Withdrawal...

15. (S) Sannino, Sessa, and Nelli Feroci each stated up front that, given the current political situation in Italy and what the Prodi government viewed as a clear electoral mandate for complete troop withdrawal, all/all Italian troops would be withdrawn by the end of the year. Each stressed, however, that the Italian model for withdrawal would be better than the "Spanish" or "Dutch" models in that Italy would not pull out suddenly or in an uncoordinated way, and would increase its non-military support for Iraq. The problem, they said, was with "military in the field."

16. (S) Sessa outlined the Prodi government's thinking on troop withdrawal, emphasizing the continuity with the

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Berlusconi government's plan, which envisioned a phased troop withdrawal by the end of 2006. The current debate within the government was on modalities and timing. Sessa said neither PM Prodi, FM D'Alema, nor Defense Minister Parisi would bow to the extreme left's calls for immediate troop withdrawals. Rather, the MOD would agree on the technical modalities for withdrawal in close cooperation with the Iraqis, British, and Americans.

17. (S) The current assessment, he said, is that a "transfer of responsibilities" to the Iraq forces would occur this summer (between July and September), after which a "conditions-based" withdrawal of Italian forces would begin. Estimating that the withdrawal of Italy's remaining 1,700 troops would take three months to complete, Sessa said complete withdrawal would not occur before December, as agreed with the Iraqis and coalition partners. Sessa said this decision was the result of a difficult compromise between Italy's governing coalition members.

18. (S) This withdrawal meant that Italy would no longer be able to provide any/any force protection after the end of the year, including for the Italian PRT in Dhi Qar. Since Italy could not leave any civilians on the ground without military protection, Italian civilians also would have to leave the PRT before December. Sessa stressed, however, that Italy would not abandon Iraq and would use the PRT (which the Italians prefer to call a "Unit for Reconstruction Support") to accomplish as much as possible before the end of the year. The MFA also envisioned civilian projects to support the Iraqis not just in the south but also in Baghdad and Kurdistan, through bilateral and multilateral initiatives.

...but Open to Ways to Salvage Italian PRT

19. (S) Deputy S/I Stephenson firmly stressed the U.S. viewed Italy's previous expressed support for a PRT as core

component of planning to help the Iraqi people in Dhi Qar province after January 1. She noted a civilian-led PRT was fully consistent with the government's campaign promises and announced plans to help the Iraqi people. She suggested that, if Italy could not provide force protection, it consider alternative solutions. Sannino said that the Berlusconi government's plan for a PRT backed by a substantial Italian military presence was "politically untenable." He agreed, however, to ask PM Prodi whether an Italian PRT with force protection provided by another coalition member was possible, adding that Italy's desire to provide civilian assistance was still there. "If there is a way to do it, we will do it," he said.

¶10. (S) Nelli Feroci also said the PRT as "configured by the previous government" is "unpracticable in the present situation." Nevertheless, he called Italy's military presence in Dhi Qar an "enormous investment" that Italy did not want to lose. The GOI would not exclude a civilian presence and had nothing against a PRT "per se," though it would be very problematic. Italy is open to options, he said, but can not provide force protection, which was "not sellable." The Iraqi authorities with whom D'Alema met during his June 7 trip to Baghdad (in which Nelli Feroci, Sessa, and De Martino participated) "perfectly understand" the Italian withdrawal overall, which Nelli Feroci said had been agreed with both the Iraqis and coalition forces--although all Italian officials admitted that PRTs were not specifically discussed with the Iraqis. D'Alema reportedly offered Italy's full support in consolidating Iraq's process of democratization, reconstruction, and national reconciliation. Italy has made a political decision to remain in Iraq, Nelli Feroci stressed.

¶11. (S) De Martino outlined three options for the PRT: 1) an Italian lead with Italian force protection (which he deemed "more than impossible"); 2) an Italian lead with another coalition member providing force protection; and 3) a non-Italian lead (but with Italian participation) with non-Italian force protection. Sessa was pessimistic that the British would provide force protection. Another possibility would be to move the Italian PRT to Talill (within the U.S.

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perimeter), but this would still leave the issue of convoy protection. Sessa, who said he personally was responsible for the Italian civilians sent to Dhi Qar, was wary of entrusting force protection to other coalition partners, who might not be as well accepted by local Iraqis or acceptable to Italian political leaders. How would Prodi explain to parliament why the government was sending Italian citizens to Iraq under foreign security protection? However, he agreed to explore the possibility.

¶12. (S) Amerio discounted the possibility of using Italian carabinieri for force protection, stating that they are viewed as part of the army, "especially when they are abroad." (Note. Since 2002 Italy's carabinieri formally constitute the fourth branch of the Italian military, though they do provide civil protection services domestically. End note.) All Italian officials agreed that Iraqi force protection for Italian civilians was not an acceptable solution.

Italy Urges Stronger NATO/Multinational Role

¶13. (S) Nelli Feroci, who had just come from PM Prodi's meeting with NATO Secretary General De Hoop Scheffer, said the Italians told the SecGen Italy would like to see an increased role for the NATO Training Mission in Iraqi (NTM-I). (Note. Italy, with 32 Italians, including the Deputy Commander, leads three out of four modules in the NATO training mission. End note.) Italy would like to help bring "more Europe" into Iraq; the more multilateral, international efforts are in Iraq, the better, he said, starting with NATO.

¶14. (S) Amerio confirmed Italy's role in NTM-I would not be affected by the Italian troop withdrawal. He did not reject the possibility that Italy send 50-100 carabinieri as part of NTM-I, but noted that sending them to Dhi Qar raised the force protection issue again. A more logical solution would be to send them to al-Rustamiyah.

¶15. (S) Sessa, calling NATO the "pillar of future initiatives," noted that even a NATO role would be difficult given NATO's military nature, but said that the top levels of the Prodi government regarded Italy's role in NTM-I as a priority. Italy planned to increase the number of people it will send to NTM-I and is assessing the possibility of training Iraqi security forces (ISF) through NATO, as requested by the Iraqi government.

¶16. (S) Sessa echoed Amerio's views on training ISF in Dhi Qar, saying Italy could not withdraw its troops through the front door, only to have them reenter "through the window." However, he said the carabinieri would be more than ready and happy to continue training ISF if there was a clear security framework. The MOD is looking into this, he said, adding that within NATO there were certainly opportunities for providing increased training.

¶17. (S) Sessa also stressed the need to promote more multilateral international efforts. Sessa argued for a more concrete UN role, urging the UN to provide more financial and human resources, though he said it would be difficult since the UN still is not ready to be engaged on the ground. Sessa also pushed for more involvement of Iraq's neighbors, including Iran and the Arab League, saying Italy could play a role in soliciting involvement by regional players.

¶18. (SBU) Sessa requested that officials from Washington again meet in Rome for bilateral consultations on Monday June 19 and trilateral meetings with the UK on June 20 to further discuss the way forward on PRTs.

Comment

¶19. (S) The Prodi government has clearly buckled under pressure of the far left (Greens and Communists, who together received ten percent of the vote in Italy's Chamber of Deputies in the April 9-10 parliamentary elections) to pull its troops out of Iraq. Prodi does not want to risk a

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government crisis similar to 1998, when the far left caused his first government to collapse. Moderate center-left leaders were unequivocal in their pre-election conversations with us that troop withdrawals would follow Berlusconi's plan and would be compensated by an even stronger civilian presence than envisioned by Berlusconi. Prodi's razor-thin majority in the Senate and a surprisingly strong showing by left-wing radicals have forced Prodi to revisit the PRT commitment. One prominent Communist official recently crowed that they have moved Prodi to the left. On Iraq, that certainly appears to be the case.

¶20. (S) Deputy S/I Stephenson was successful in bringing the Italian position back from a determined "no PRT" to a willingness to consider possible force protection options that would allow Italy to maintain its civilian leadership of the Dhi Qar PRT, or at least not to close the door on it before FM D'Alema's June 16 meeting with Secretary Rice. The devil remains in the details: finding a force protection solution that the GOI can accept and can sell to the center-left constituents, and above all, the far left parties in the governing coalition. Italian force protection/troop presence in Dhi Qar at any level after December is clearly no longer an option.

¶21. (U) Deputy S/I Stephenson has cleared this cable.

